

ever ready to wage war against each other or to oppose the invasion of Portuguese pirates and Mag freebooters.

Note on Mahásthán near Bagurá (Bogra), Eastern Bengal.—By C. J. O'DONNELL, C. S.

Mahásthán Garh is the name of a place famous in the earliest Hindu traditions of this part of India, and also of interest in later times as a Muhammadan shrine of great sanctity. It is situated seven miles north of the Civil Station of Bogra, in $24^{\circ} 57'$ north latitude and $89^{\circ} 25'$ east longitude, and consists of a great mound of earth intermixed with old bricks. This is the Hindu Mahásthán, which, literally translated, means the "great place." Branching out from it north and west are two great ramparts, which are continued round to form a quadrangular enclosure, the later Musalmán Fort or *Garh*. Dr. Buchanan, in his account of the Dínájpúr District, says, "the tradition belonging to this District, which is referred to the earliest period by the Hindus, is that it was under the government of Paras'uráma, a very powerful monarch who had subject to him twenty-two princes, and who lived at Mahásthán Garh in Rájsháhí. The Bráhmaṇs, whom I have consulted, consider this personage as the same with the sixth incarnation of the god Vishṇu, who appeared an immense number of years ago, and on this account I have placed this tradition first; but the common belief of the country is that Paras'uráma of Mahásthán was destroyed by a Muhammadan saint named Sháh Sultán Hazrat Auliyá. This does not appear remarkable to the Bráhmaṇs, as they consider that Paras'uráma is still on earth and that he now resides in the western parts of India." They make no remark on the contradiction necessary in referring at once to the earliest Hindu tradition and the Musalmán conquest of Eastern Bengal. The only other source from which I have been able to obtain any information about Mahásthán is a selection of popular legends called 'Laghú Bháráta,' put together by a Deputy Collector of this District in very high-flown Sanskrit, together with some theories of his own. The value of the work may be judged from one of the latter, in which he seeks to prove that, after the Páṇḍava war, Sisunág, of the family of the kings of Magadhá, was an independent sovereign of Mecca in Arabia. With regard to Mahásthán he seems more correct. He identifies it with Bárendra, the capital of the country of the Bárendra Hindus. In favour of this view the only arguments are strong, though simple. The whole country between the Ganges, the Mahánandá, Kám-rúp, and the Karatoyá, was undoubtedly the old Barendra Desha. To the present day, much of it is

called 'Barind'. The locality of the greatest fame within it is Mahásthán, and the river of the greatest sanctity, the Karatoyá. At the same time there are evident traces, as I shall afterwards mention, that a considerable city existed near Mahásthán, whilst tradition is even stronger on the point. At that time who were its rulers, it is impossible to say. All round it, however, there are shrines, holy wells and embankments connected with the name of Bhíma, one of the Páñḍava brothers. The legend runs that at the end of their great contest with the Kauravas, they went into the forests of Kám-rúp to perform the penitential ceremony, called *banabás*, for a year, at the end of which time Bhíma settled in the country of the King Viráta, who ruled in Matsya Desha, or the Land of the Fish, which included much of the present Bogra District, and was so called from the fact that Viráta was said to be the offspring of his mother's amour with a fish. Bhíma is said to have made a large fortified town south of Mahásthán, which is marked by great earthworks altogether about eight miles long, and still in places as much as twenty feet high. The whole country between them and Mahásthán is in places covered with old bricks. Inside the earthworks the bricks are fewer, but outside and east from Mahásthán they are very numerous. I am led to think that the enclosure was, like the ring forts of Italy, a place of temporary refuge not only for the people of the neighbouring town, but of the country round in times of danger. On one side it was protected by the great river Karatoyá, and on the other by a deep and wide ditch for some four miles long, which still exists and is used for boat-traffic in the rains. These earthworks are called by the people *Bhímá-jangal*. After Bhíma a dynasty of Asuras is said to have reigned in the surrounding country, and to have made the shrine at Mahásthán one of its most holy places. In Bráhmaṇi literature the word 'Asura' is used very much as we use pagan, and was certainly applied to the Buddhists. Dr. Buchanan explains it as meaning 'a worshipper of S'íva' as opposed to a worshipper of Krishṇa. The other explanation is now preferred, particularly as it is known that the earlier Pála Rájás, many of the remains of whose times are found in this district, were Buddhists. The history of this dynasty belongs properly to Dínájpúr, but it may be mentioned in connection with Mahásthán that there is a legend that on a certain occasion twelve persons of very high distinction and mostly named Pála, came from the west, to perform a religious ceremony in the Karatoyá river, but arriving too late, settled down on its banks till the next occurrence of the holy season, the Náráyaṇí, which depends on certain conjunctions of the planets, and was then twelve years distant. They are said to have built numerous palaces and temples, dug tanks, and performed other pious acts. They are said to have been of the Bhuinhár or Bháman *zamíndár* tribe, which is, at the present day, represented by the Rájás of Banáras and Bhattia.

On the top of the Mahásthán mound there lies a figure made seemingly of limestone, which I was informed by one of the *fakírs* of the Muhammadan shrine had been found in a neighbouring marsh. It is the figure of a woman, very like what is usually said to be of Buddhist production, but is perfectly nude, and it is hard to find any distinguishing sign. The back is quite undressed and the lower legs which have no feet are square, as if they were intended to fit into holes in some larger piece of stone, probably some part of the front of a temple.

After this time, Mahásthán became a seat of orthodox Hinduism, and the worship of S'iva was celebrated with much fervour. Within a radius of a mile, a hundred thousand *lingas* are said to have been set up in honour of that god. About the end of the thirteenth century, according to the most generally accepted traditions, Mahásthán was the capital of a minor Kshatriya prince, named Paras'uráma. At that time the Muhammadans had conquered Gaur, and driven the last Hindu dynasty out of Nadiyá, and their arms were beginning to be pushed to Eastern Bengal. It was then that a humble *fakír* or religious mendicant appeared before Paras'uráma, and begged for as much ground as he might cover with his *chamrá*, or skin, kneeling on which he might say his prayers. The Hindu prince granted his request, and the *fakír*, turning towards the west, began to pray. Scarcely had he done so when the skin began to expand, and before he had done, it covered nearly the whole principality. Paras'uráma called his troops together and attacked the *fakír*, but to no purpose, as he and they perished in the battle. Paras'uráma had one daughter, the beautiful S'ilá Deví, whom the conqueror, who bore the name of Sháh Sulţán Hazrat Auliyá, now claimed as his prize. The Hindu princess pretending to accept her fate, found an opportunity of stabbing him, and then threw herself into the Karatoyá. A steep part of the bank, where there is now a flight of stairs, still bears the name of S'ilá Deví's Ghát, and in Hindu hymns the favourite name for Mahásthán is 'S'ilá Dvípa', or the Island of S'ilá. The word 'island' draws attention to a change which has taken place in the river Karatoyá. It at one time divided into two branches near Mahásthán, re-uniting again about a mile north of the present town of Bagurá. The western branch is now the little stream Subil.

There is a title very frequently appended to Sháh Sulţán's name, *viz.* : 'máhi-suwár', or 'riding on a fish', which is variously explained. The most generally given, though not very satisfactory, reason is, that he came in a boat shaped like a fish, or with the figure-head of a fish. A very strange figure is still found on the top of the Mahásthán mound, which may be connected with this name. There is the figure of a girl with a long fish's tail, altogether presenting the recognized semblance of the mermaid of English story. The tail is curved up under the right arm, and is covered with

scales. On her head there are also, what seem to be, large scales instead of hair. She is half reclining on her left side, but on what no one can say, as it is much defaced and partly broken or perhaps only chipped. On her right shoulder is a large right hand clenched, placed back downwards with the fingers turned up. At first, this seems part of a larger figure from which it was broken, but I found on a piece of limestone which seemed to have been at one time the threshold of a temple, a relief, much worn, which was precisely the same as the larger one. The relief was three to four inches long and the other about two feet square. I cannot pretend to explain these forms, but it is quite possible that they are connected with the old Hindu times, and may be some reference in stone to the allegory to the name of the land of the fish applied to this country.

All the Muhammadan buildings, some of which by appearance and repute are modern, are entirely made of brick, except where stones, evidently taken from some older building, are used. I noticed a few small blocks of granite lying about. At present, the shrine is approached from the Rangpúr road on the west by a steep flight of stairs. These are evidently of comparatively modern erection, the former approach being from the north by a winding path, like those seen on Buddhist topes, which, after passing nearly once round the mound leads to a spot midway between the tomb of Sháh Sulṭán and a small mosque built some two hundred years ago, and where a large *linga*, some three feet and a half wide, still lies half buried in the ground. The door entering into the tomb is supported on two uprights of stone, on each of which a word or two in Devanagarí is still to be seen, though they are in parts so worn as to be unintelligible. I was told by one of the *fakírs* who live on the mound that about twenty years ago an English gentleman carried away to Rangpúr a large square block of stone, on all four sides of which there were inscriptions—he could not say in what character—and figures like the woman-fish above mentioned. This shrine is supported by the largest *pírpal* holding in the district, measuring as it does some 650 acres. It was granted by a sanad given by an Emperor of Dihlí. This has been lost, but it is known that the grant was recognized and confirmed in the year 1076, Hijrah, A. D. 1066, by a *farmán* of the governor of Dháká. In 1836, proceedings were instituted by Government for resumption of this tenure, but they were abandoned in 1844 on proof of the great age of the grant. There are besides other sources of revenue. A fair is held at Mahásthán about the middle of April, the profits of which (about £60) are made over to the shrine. The *mutawallis* of the *dargáh* are of the family of the Chaudharí zamíndárs of Bilár and Paikar.
